

Skies captured Kulyk's eye

Artist's travels took her to Europe and U.S. and into abstract painting

By ELISSA BARNARD Arts Reporter

Karen Kulyk was walking the fabled Camino to Compostela in Spain, but she wasn't looking at the ground. Her eyes were drawn skyward.

"What I was astounded by was these endless skies," says the Halifax painter, known for her sunny French, Italian and Spanish scenes and ebullient still lifes.

"I was seeing these wonderful abstract compositions always moving. How do you paint that visual excitement?"

With a lot of joy, if Kulyk's enthusiasm is an indication, and a lot of blues.

"There's a whole series of blues. I love cobalt blue, I love turquoise, thalo, Prussian blue, indigo. There's one called king's blue, Sevres."

This series traces Kulyk's year of travel to Spain, Berlin, Texas, Brazil and Yorkshire, England, where her in-laws live, but she points out that skies are universal.

"You wouldn't say it's obviously Paris or Spain or Halifax."

In fact, her painting of an arid yellow Spanish land beneath a huge blue sky that dives and glistens was bought by a woman from Saskatchewan because it reminded her of her Prairie childhood.

"Skies are often painted as soft, still clouds, very peaceful, and I wanted them to be full of action and movement."

This exhibit also traces Kulyk's journey into abstraction. Her first painting, *After the Storm, Brazil*, was inspired by the sun coming out after Brazil's daily rain at 5 p.m. It's a light blue and yellow sky framed by the dark green leaves of the rainforest.

Kulyk's final painting is of Halifax in fog, and it's full of colour from purple to orange and shapes with no clear reference to land or sea.

"It really is trying to talk about fog and how it flattens everything, but we see things coming in and out of the fog and little bits of light. The orange is the last thing I applied so it would punch out."

Rossignol, Lyon, was actually inspired by a nightingale.

"I shaped the perspective as if you were a bird looking down on to the water. I heard a nightingale sing at night, the most beautiful, plaintive song. The song was so haunting. I wanted to paint the sound of the nightingale."

The darkest, heaviest sky belongs to Russia in the spring and was recorded when Kulyk was on a slow boat ride.

"I've been to Russia many times but I've never painted it. That greyness over the top is reflected in everything."

The Descending Path of a Sun belongs to Yorkshire.

"I was watching the sunset through my mother-in-law's window and the sun dropped like a ball of red. I couldn't wait to get home to paint it," says Kulyk, wearing a cobalt blue dress.

"I think this is a wonderful entrance into abstraction. I have never painted purely abstract, but I always like simplifying things. I was meant to do this but in my own logical way.

"The sky has given me the freedom to further abstract the land. I can look further down now at where my feet are."

Those feet might be walking in the Himalayas next, since the friend who invited her to do the medieval pilgrimage route of the Camino has asked if she'd like to walk in the Himalayas in July.

"And I'll take my drawing book," says Kulyk, who paints from pencil and ink sketches with the colours coming from her head.

Kulyk will be in the gallery for Halifax's one-night Nocturne art festival on Oct. 16. She and gallery owners Victoria Page and Victoria Strange are going to wear blue.

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